

Review

The Globalizations of Organized Labour: 1945-2005

George Myconos (Palgrave, 2005)

Reviewed by Mills Soko

This book is about the complex world of trade union relations. It focuses, in particular, on the important changes that have occurred in transnational (cross-border) trade union networks and relationships from 1945 to 2005. The key point made by the author is that although these networks have become globally integrated in recent decades, their political organisation has remained oriented towards the nation-state. Put differently, the internationalisation of organised labour has not necessarily resulted in its separation from the nation-state.

The spread of the transnational labour network has enabled trade unions to undertake advocacy campaigns across borders. Transnational advocacy came about as the result of a shift in organised labour's relationship with oppositional civil society actors; actors who were involved in progressive struggles for such causes as distributive and social justice, peace, and gender rights.

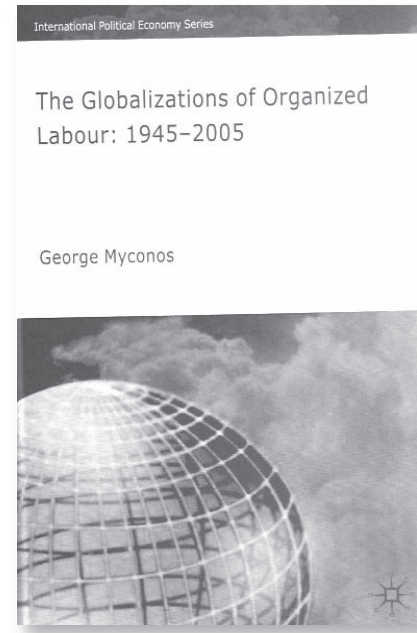
Historically, there has been an uneasy relationship between trade unions and oppositional movements. Despite fleeting co-operation between these social forces in the late 1960s, oppositional movements (particularly those of the New Left ideological orientation) continued to view labour as 'hopelessly

reformist and compromised'. On the other hand, trade union leaders balked at what they considered to be an encroachment of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) into their spheres of influence.

However, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed a rapprochement between labour unions and oppositional civil society forces. This was inspired by a number of factors, including American intervention in Latin America, growing violent attacks against trade unionists, the struggle against apartheid, and the proliferation of export processing zones.

This closer cross-border collaboration was notable in the efforts to eliminate child labour, which brought the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) into contact with a range of civil realm organisations. The launch by the ICFTU in 1994 of a worldwide campaign to end child labour was followed by its adoption of a Charter against Child Labour, which was in turn followed by its participation in the Global March Against Child Labour in 1998.

By 2000, the ICFTU's reports and publications were interspersed with references to NGOs and 'people's organisations'. To translate its rhetoric into reality, the confederation strengthened its links with many NGOs in South



East Asia, Latin America and Africa. These included such organisations as Human Rights Watch, Social Alert, the World Organisation Against Torture, and the Clean Clothes Campaign.

The ICFTU's engagement also extended to knowledge-based centres of critique, including the Transnationals Information Exchange, the International Centre for Trade Union Rights, the International Labour Rights Education and Research Fund, Labour Notes, the Resource Centre of the Americas, Asia Monitor Resource Centre, the Centro de Información Laboral y Asesoría Sindical, Third World Network, and Focus on the Global South.

At the national level, 'social movement unionism' grew in

countries such as Brazil, South Africa and South Korea and was characterised by trade unions dealing with issues that were not within their immediate purview.

Typical of this unionism was the emergence of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), which positioned itself as part of a broader movement that struggled against the apartheid system. Cosatu's defining feature was the degree to which it forged union-community alliances. This involved establishing links with youth, women's and civic organisations in order to tackle community concerns such as rent boycotts, the education crisis, and poor living conditions. It also entailed connecting to grassroots social movement formations that built organisations of direct democracy, including street and area committees, people's courts as well as defence committees.

Globalisation and regionalisation have presented the labour movement with an opportunity to continue to assert its presence across borders. This has been manifested, for example, in the area of international trade where trade unions have joined forces with civil society actors to either completely oppose free trade agreements, or change provisions in existing agreements, or pressurise governments to adopt labour standards. In

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fundamental ways, opposition to free trade agreements has come to represent a crucial site of struggle for trade unions and oppositional civil society forces to influence decision-making within the nation-state.

Even so, the author cautions, organised labour's prospects in this regard should not be exaggerated for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the degree of unity between affiliates of transnational and regional confederations, and between domestic trade union affiliates of national federations, should not be overestimated. This is because trade liberalisation is a more pressing concern for some trade unions than it is for others. Secondly, cross-border cooperation between progressive formations of

the North and South has not been without its problems and stresses. These tensions have revolved mainly around the former's support of protectionist trade policies.

In conclusion, the book argues that although globalisation, with the attendant proliferation of multi-level systems of global governance, has created spaces for organised labour to mobilise across borders, such mobilisation has been mediated by the politics of the nation-state. In other words, nation-states have played a critical role in shaping the nature of global integration experienced by trade union networks. This attests to the endurance of the nation-state in the face of globalisation pressures: even though globalisation has altered the character of the nation-state in terms of its role, power and functions, the nation-state has remained the principal societal actor and authority.

Not only is this book an important contribution to the broader globalisation debate, it provides an original and insightful analysis of the historical development of the transnational labour networks over the past six decades.

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